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American Literary Reactions to the Pétroleuses of the Paris Commune

In his book *From Appomattox to Montmartre: Americans and the Paris Commune*, Philip Katz describes the American reaction to the Paris civil war of 1871 as touching “every corner of American culture” (69). The Commune affected all popular media, with the possible exceptions of opera and sheet music, including the American literary sphere (69). News about the Commune poured most notably into newspapers and periodicals: “the American press was clamorous in its reaction to the insurrection of Paris” (Baker 37). One recurring image throughout America was that of the pétroleuse, a representation of a “dangerous unruly woman—the female incendiary” (Gullickson 241). Supposedly burning palaces and buildings throughout Paris, the pétroleuse infused the American media and became the subject for numerous short stories and poems in newspapers and periodicals. By analyzing three short stories and four poems written from 1871 to 1892, I will reveal how authors used the pétroleuse as an emblem of American anxiety in regards to the social class war of the Paris Commune. Both the stories and the poems blame the French government for subjugating Paris citizens, but the stories depict the pétroleuse as a victim of the state, while the poems depict her as a martyr for the people.

The Commune arose in direct response to the provisional government established after France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, a conflict between the Second French Empire and the Kingdom of Prussia. After years of tension between the two nations, they finally engaged in battle in response to “the [Prussian] candidature of a Hohenzollern prince to the Spanish throne”

(Tombs 42). A Prussian on the Spanish throne would have upset the current balance of power in Europe in favor of the Kingdom of Prussia. France therefore mobilized, and on July 19 declared war. The other German states quickly joined Prussia's side. To say that this war went badly for France would be an understatement: "Franc[e]'s finest troops were taken out of the war and the whole land lay open to Prussian advance. Napoleon III was himself a prisoner" (Baker 4-5). When news reached Paris on September 4 that Prussia had forced Napoleon to surrender, "a crowd gathered peacefully at the Palais Bourbon where [...they] proclaimed the downfall of the empire" (Tombs 43). That same day, members of the Republican Party quickly "proclaimed a republic and installed themselves as the Government of National Defence," establishing France's Third Republic (Tombs 43).

The Parisians and the National Assembly survived the last several months of the siege under extremely grueling conditions. The poorer Parisians faced especially difficult circumstances: they "were reduced to eating rats" during "a grueling, tedious, claustrophobic and debilitating ordeal" (Tombs 53). For women, the "the daily burden, which fell almost entirely on [them], began with long waits on dark and icy mornings outside butchers' and bakers' for scraps of meat and bread" (Tombs 53). Some women faced extreme circumstances, a few offering "to sleep with [men] for a crust of bread" (Tombs 53). Moreover, the newly created water supply "was cut off by the besiegers, leaving the city dependent on dirty water from the Seine." (Tombs 53). And with winter fast approaching, "the temperature fell regularly below zero towards the end of December" (Tombs 53). Furthermore, "accommodations were cramped and fuel for heat was scarce" (Tombs 53). As a result of these conditions, death and illness rates spiked: "by the end of the siege, the death rate was four times its peacetime level" (Tombs 54). After four months of "hunger" and "bombardment," the national government capitulated in January 1871

(Tombs 1). After the siege, national elections voted conservative Adolphe Thiers to head of the newly formed National Assembly, the provisional government based on “peace and monarchy” (Tombs 63).

The war left the country in economic disarray, and the new government only further burdened the Parisian people. The aftermath was devastating: “siege and bombardment had brought in their wake destruction and severe privation; food was scarce and prices were high.” In fact, “in workers’ homes there was a struggle against starvation” (Baker 6). Yet, the National Assembly issued two controversial decisions which only harmed its citizens: they lifted the “wartime moratorium on commercial bills of exchange” and moved the nation’s capital to Versailles (Tombs 66). The lifting of the moratorium financially pressed the already downtrodden people of Paris, who “felt abandoned by the Assembly” (Baker 7). Moreover, the Parisian populace regarded “‘decapitalization’ as an insult, a blow to the city’s prestige and economic prospects, and proof of the monarchists’ sinister intentions” (Tombs 66). In other words, the Parisians were furious at the loss of Paris as France’s capital city. Fear in response to the dictatorial government quickly “spread in urban areas and especially in Paris [...] coupled with defiance of the monarchically inclined Versailles Assembly” (Baker 8). In fact, Paris perceived the members of the Versailles government with “popular resentment” as they constituted “the well-fed, hoarders, and profiteers” (Tombs 55). Tensions over these two decisions rose to such a level that Thiers was forced to prevent bloodshed “through the restraint exercised by the National Guard” (Baker 8). However, the Versailles government made one last crucial misstep and attempted to remove the canons guarding Paris, which were “a potent symbol of the independent power of the city and its people” (Tombs 66). Already on edge, the Parisians initiated “an unplanned mass resistance that turned into insurrection” (Tombs 77). In reaction to

this rebellion, “government authority collapsed, and the central committee of the National Guard Federation directed affairs in Paris” (Baker 9). As of March 18, 1871, Paris no longer recognized the Versailles government as the leading authority in the city (Baker 9). This revolution became known as the Paris Commune.

The Commune was a class struggle: the abused citizens attempted to liberate themselves from the power of the aristocratic National Assembly in Versailles. Tombs notes that the siege “produced a gross caricature of peacetime social inequality, with differences in basic living standards between the rich and the rest not seen since the eighteenth century” (54). A great social divide arose, with the majority of the Paris citizens lacking the basic necessities while only a few remaining financially well-off. Indeed, “the livelihood of most Parisians had become extremely precarious in what amounted to a mass pauperization of the lower-middle and working-class population” (Tombs 56). These lower-middle and working-class populations, which I will from now on term the “urban class,” confronted and rebelled against the Versailles government, who they “stigmatized as criminals and monarchist conspirators” (Tombs 76).

Great concern and hope rose in the American press for a France surrounded in bloodshed, tyranny, and “an orgy of fraternal conflict” (Baker 39). The 20 May 1871 edition of *Harper’s Weekly* notes that “if France in her great agony could learn the value of ‘free thought’ and ‘free speech’ [...] then ‘the blood taught experience will not be too dearly earned’” (Baker 41¹). In other words, some optimistically thought that the revolution would promote the ideals of freedom and liberty after order was restored; they encourage the idea of a social class uprising. This column supported the revolutionaries who sought the same ideals promoted in the American Declaration of Independence— “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (“The Declaration

¹ I have been unable to locate this edition of *Harper’s Weekly* cited in Baker. According to the online research database *Harpweek*, the edition came out on 21 May, not 20 May. Furthermore, through a general search of the database, I have been unable to locate this the issue of the publication, nor the author for it.

of Independence”). However, others felt “that the French had brought these great burdens onto their own shoulders” (Baker 42). The American political magazine *Nation* promoted that France’s constant political turmoil left it in a state prime for a reign of terror (Baker 42). These views do not necessarily agree with the urban class revolution, but understand the necessity of one in reaction to the National Assembly.

One image which emblemizes this urban class revolution is the figure of the pétroleuse, the female incendiary charged with burning all of Paris. Often identified as a fury in literature, this woman supposedly took part in the urban class insurrection against the suppressive National Assembly by burning buildings with bottles of vitrol. In reality, although these women revolutionaries “may have participated in the burning of the Tuileries Palace, the vast majority of the fires were set by men” (Gullickson 247). Why, then, did the press accuse the woman of burning Paris and not the men? It acted on the unfounded rumors based on overseas accounts. Originally, according to Gullickson, the May 26 edition of *The New York Times* published that firefighters were pumping petroleum instead of water on burning buildings. These reports appear in similar publications in Europe, such as *Le Gaulois*, which asserted on May 28 and 29 that “women, men, and children had been hired and paid ten francs per building to start fires” (247-48). From these accusations, “reports soon claimed that ‘many’ of the arrested women were *pétroleuses*” (Gullickson 248). After these initial rumors, Americans believed “the credibility of the ‘reports’ of the female incendiaries” based on their “specificity” (Gullickson 248). In other words, newspapers utilized an abundance of detail, insinuating the truthfulness of these supposed reports. The press transformed the pétroleuse, though originally based in fact, into a legend based on rumor. These rumors influenced authors, who then utilized this false image of the pétroleuse to promote through her various reactions to the social class revolt of the Commune.

The first reaction I will show is how the victimized representation of the pétroleuse in three short stories demonstrates how America viewed the Commune as a bloody insurrection by the urban class against the aristocratically inclined government. These short stories do not promote a social class uprising, but concede its necessity under the National Assembly regime. Each of the stories contains three key qualities supporting one side of the American reaction in the press. First, the aristocratic characters reveal how the values of the National Assembly corrupted France. Second, these nobility influence whether or not their dependent ladies will be forced into the role of a pétroleuse, revealing the aristocracy's culpability for the Commune. Finally, the stories depict the pétroleuses as furies seeking only to escape the rabble, urban class to which they have been subjected by the aristocratic government. Although the terms “victim” and “fury” initially appear discordant, they actually work in tandem. The women are victims of their social class in the sense that the government, through the repressive acts of the National Assembly, has subjected them to the very worst: starvation, prostitution, poverty, and disease. This forced suppression then leaves the women only two options: despair or rebellion. Those who rebel are then depicted as furies seeking to impart revenge on the government for their subjection and at the same time escape the confines of their social class.

Appearing in Boston's *Every Saturday*² in five parts between the November 25 and December 2 issues, the anonymous story “Une Pétroleuse: A Souvenir of Versailles” reveals the American perception that the Versailles government provoked Paris' civil war. First, the title of this short story demonstrates the National Assembly's culpability for the Commune. The title changes meaning based on translation and can be translated as either “a memory of Versailles” or “a keepsake of Versailles.” The former reveals that the short story recalls a person, the pétroleuse, from recent history. The latter translation evokes the notion that the pétroleuse is a

² *Every Saturday* is a Boston periodical known for its illustrations, rivaling *Harper's* (Chielens 464).

reminder of Versailles. Therefore, the author directly associates the pétroleuse with the National Assembly and their forced subjugation of females like her. With either translation, the pétroleuse appears as a victim of the circumstances surrounding her.

The flighty characterization of the aristocratic main character furthers the claim that France was guilty for its own revolution. The male protagonist, Floriant, Marquis de la Rue de Lille, falls in love at first sight with the “purest virgin” in the story, Félicie (25 November 1871). Though Félicie is not of the aristocracy, the village of Champterre deems her its most valued maiden. Lovestruck, Floriant convinces Félicie to flee her fiancé and homeland and become his mistress. In doing so, Floriant causes her to lose her purity and therefore her status as a woman (12 November 1871). After running away together, Floriant decides that since she does not come from the nobility that he cannot marry her. He therefore leaves her with no money and a tarnished reputation, while he chooses to marry someone else. Félicie is left on the street, quite literally. And with no funds or resources, the capricious Floriant forces Félicie to lead a life of poverty by ensuring she cannot join another social circle. Félicie cannot join the aristocracy as Floriant refuses to marry her and she cannot rejoin the society of Champterre because she is no longer a virgin (2 December 1871). By enforcing the class hierarchy, the nobility guarantees that their subjugated inferiors have no other choice but to rebel and fight for their desired equality, or in Félicie’s case, revenge.

Félicie’s dependency on the aristocracy parallels France’s dependency on its government directly after the Franco-Prussian War, reinforcing the pétroleuse’s justification to revolt. The narrator describes Félicie as “a young creature all impulse, with good qualities and dangerous instincts so evenly balanced in her, that it depended upon mere hair’s-breadth chance which would turn the scale” (12 November 1871). Her character appears situational, with virtuous

people or situations rendering her good and vices turning her dangerous. This description of her parallels the state of France at the formation of the National Assembly. After a war which left the majority of France destitute, the government could either bring prosperity or incite rebellion. The marquis represents the aristocracy who has the opportunity to sway Félicie's "evenly balanced" character, just as the National Assembly has the opportunity to form France's future. In the end, the aristocracy through Floriant chooses to corrupt its dependent and the initial symbol of purity in the story, Félicie. The National Assembly, too, "turn[s] the scale" of France after the Prussian War of 1870, provoking revolution. Félicie's fall from grace becomes even more tragic when Floriant decides to marry and leave her to fend for herself with no money and no reputation (2 December 1871). The National Assembly, in taking the canons from Versailles, also left the city defenseless. Félicie's only option as a destitute woman is to become a pétroleuse, just as the Paris' impoverished workers had no choice but to revolt.

Finally, the depiction of these subjugated furies reveals the government's culpability for the rebellion and blamelessness of the pétroleuse. At the end of the story, the embassy calls in the narrator to determine the identity of one of the pétroleuses, which the reader soon discovers is none other than Félicie. But she is no longer a young, beautiful, virtuous girl. Instead, the narrator describes her as "ignobly clad, and deeply pitted with smallpox" (2 December 1871). The narrator is shocked beyond words at her transformation and when asked to verify her identity, remarks that she should be "'pitied'" (2 December 1871). She explains that her transformation derived from disease and poverty. Here, the reader sees that Félicie has gone from the most valued maiden of Champterre to the lowest member of Parisian society. Moreover, these circumstances have changed her character, inciting within her the need for revenge: "Why I have burned the Hotel de Floriant *you* know... I have debarred him [the marquis] from ever

wrecking the happiness of another girl as he did mine. I was wrong to burn his home, that I confess: but we do things in moments of bitterness that we would not do otherwise” (2 December 1871). Félicie reveals that the only option open to her as a member of the urban class is to revolt against those who have forced her into her dreadful situation. The story does not blame her for her actions, but instead pities her and the circumstances to which she has been reduced. She appears as both the victim of the hierarchy and a fury in rebelling against it.

Mary Spencer’s “A Story of the ‘Commune’” published in *Peterson’s Magazine* in 1879 also contains the three main elements characteristic of these short stories: the negatively characterized aristocratic characters, the urban class dependency on these characters, and the subjugated furies reacting against these aristocratic characters. The main characters’ nobility gives them a belief in their superiority over the lower classes, revealing the inherent tension in the class system. This tension derives from Irene’s, widowed Marquise de Villeroi, decision to disguise herself as a maid from the working class in order to visit her foster-mother. After doing so, the police arrest Irene as they think her to be her foster-mother who is suspected of being a pétroleuse (51). The police, though, refuse to listen to her claims of nobility: “‘Every *Pétroleuse*, nearly, that we arrest now, calls herself a countess, or a duchess, to make us believe she is innocent. The trick is played out’” (51-2). The policeman’s response to Irene implies that no woman of the aristocracy would be part of the female incendiary faction because she would have no reason to rebel. The pétroleuse, on the other hand, is of the lower class and would therefore have reason to do so. The officer's rejoinder reveals that the Commune is a class war. Moreover, Irene stands out in prison among the pétroleuses. They insinuate she is a snob, and this negative characterization of her causes them to attempt to have her executed instead of merely shipped off

to the French colonies. Irene's belief that her nobility will save her creates the tension evident in prison, tensions inherent between the aristocratic society and the urban populace.

Furthermore, Irene depends on her fiancé, a viscomte, to rescue her from the pétroleuses, and this dependency reinforces the hierarchical class structure upheld by the National Assembly. After being falsely accused, the gendarmes only find Irene innocent when her true love and fiancé, the viscomte, appears and rescues her (56). The law would not have otherwise determined the validity of her arrest: "If [the police] took every *Pétroleuse* before a court, the judges wouldn't get through, till the Day of Judgment. No, [the police] make sharper work of them" (53). In other words, Irene depends on (her) nobility to escape persecution. The exposure of her true class saves Irene; order is only restored through reasserting the class hierarchy. However, the pétroleuses do not have noblemen to save them. While we as readers do not know for certain if any of the imprisoned incendiaries are innocent, the narrator hints that some of them could be: "Sometimes, even innocent persons found in suspected localities, shared the punishment of the guilty" (50). In other words, the narrator recognizes that some pétroleuses are falsely accused of the actions associated with this term, but the government punishes them regardless. The same class hierarchy that saves Irene only condemns the accused pétroleuses, guilty or not.

Finally, Spencer, too, depicts the pétroleuses as imprisoned furies who had no option but to revolt against the aristocracy subjecting them. The pétroleuse appears to be, from the description of the woman in the jail, a title associated with women of the working class: their hearts were "long before hardened into callousness" (54). They mock Irene's claims of aristocracy and sneer at her. They have given up hope and the narrator identifies them as "lost spirits, wild with rage and despair... [who] knew their doom" (55). Compared with Irene, these accused pétroleuses come from a different social class, the urban class that Tombs references,

where only hopelessness awaits them. The interactions between Irene and the pétroleuses in prison reveal the wide divide between their worlds. Irene fears her fate, whereas these women appear to accept that no law will save them from their “doom.” Even if these women are truly guilty, they were forced into the only reaction they had at this stage against a repressive government: despair. As Tombs describes, these women lived in starvation, desperation, and poverty. Their situation allows them their fury-like reaction to their subjugated state; they had nothing to lose in rebelling.

“A Pétroleuse” by M.B. Williams, published in *The Youth’s Companion* in 1879, also asserts that France was culpable for the Commune uprising through the three main elements characteristic of these short stories: aristocrats, those dependent on them, and the furies subjected by them. The perceived status of the aristocracy sparked animosity towards them from the lower classes. The main female protagonist, Mrs. D’Eresby is “an English lady of large fortune and high social position” (218). However, she is eccentric and chooses to live outside the English genteel circles in which she was born a part. Instead, she enjoys “the frivolities of the French capital” (218). Her description of Paris insinuates the city does not take its social problems seriously. Mrs. D’Eresby, while living in this frivolous France, employs a “young girl of seventeen,” Adele, to mend lace. She eventually tries to adopt Adele, but Adele’s mother turns her away (218). In response to Mrs. D’Eresby’s attempts, Adele’s mother turns into a pétroleuse and attempts to burn down Mrs. D’Eresby’s house: ““My mother has a bottle of vitrol. I heard her say she was going to put out the haughty eyes that scorned her” (219). Adele’s mother reacts because of Mrs. D’Eresby’s “haughty” and scornful eyes; she perceives that Mrs. D’Eresby believes herself to be better based on her genteel origins. Class tensions, then, sparked the pétroleuses’ fury.

Furthermore, Adele's dependency on Mrs. D'Eresby reveals both the French aristocracy's inability to protect its own citizens and its fault in creating this fury-esque image of the pétroleuse. The aristocratic tendencies of the government subject the urban class characters. Though some, like Adele, find work in desperate times, many took the stance of Adele's mother and chose to fight to better their societal standing. These genteel, noble characters are juxtaposed with the furies chasing them. The narrator insinuates that Adele would have been corrupted by her "terrible mother, who probably met the fate of her sister *petroleuses*" (219). Adele warns Mrs. D'Eresby of her mother's plans, who subsequently saves both of them by fleeing to England. Adele is therefore dependent on Mrs. D'Eresby, a member of the British genteel circles, to save her from the circumstances of her class. Without Mrs. D'Eresby's intervention, Adele plausibly would follow her mother in joining the insurrection against the aristocratic French government. Williams' story goes further than the previous two in showing France's culpability for the Commune in that a foreign aristocratic female had to save Adele. In other words, France could not save its innocent citizens, either from becoming pétroleuses or from the civil war they instigated. Only outside intervention succeeded in doing so.

Three poems, through the pétroleuse's martyred depiction, also portray the French government as the culprit for the Commune. However, through a careful analysis of these poems, we see the Commune as an opportunistic revolution for the urban class instead of as the people's last resort. These authors assert not merely that the Versailles government is guilty, but that the revolution is a necessary step for true liberty in France. Finally, we see the importance of the pétroleuse as a central figure in each of these literary works through the analysis of one last poem. Without her as the primary speaker, we lose the American response to the social issues in France and instead only see the emotions the Commune evoked in America.

One such work is Aaron Burr Joyce's poem entitled "La Pétroleuse: Paris, May 1871" and appears in the April 1892³ edition of *Belford's Monthly and Democratic Review*. Joyce (or the periodical) places an excerpt from F.D. Wilber's book *History of the Paris Commune*⁴ at the beginning of the poem, which explains the course of events leading up to the execution of Mathilde Brunot, a "young pétroleuse of only eighteen years." Joyce seems to have modeled his poem on Brunot's execution, but deviates from Wilber's tone. Wilber presents Brunot as a victim of her circumstances, calling to her lover in "endearing terms and begg[ing] that he alone should be her executioner," and only with her last breath, after he refuses to shoot her, does she "cheer for the Commune." Here, Wilber promotes the idea that France has forced this woman into this role and is to blame for the atrocities committed against its people. Joyce, on the other hand, presents Brunot as confident and fearless, ready to die for her cause: "You, sir, what is that paper? The verdict! Let's hear it. So. You are a fine scholar; that was well read,/ The verdict is—'guilty.' Did you think I would fear it?"(13-16). Here, Brunot is insolent and unafraid. Her captors, however, are not. Brunot orders her guard to "hold up your head" and informs the captain that "your men are unsteady./ Such moping, for soldiers, I never have seen" (16, 25-6). By promoting this brave, courageous image juxtaposed against the nervous soldiers, Joyce renders this pétroleuse as proud to die for her cause, not as afraid for her life. Indeed, when she sees her lover, she tells the captain to "[l]et Jean do the shooting!/ His bullet won't hurt me.../ why did you desert me,/ To fight for the wolves that are dragging down France?" (45, 47-8). Brunot mocks Jean by informing the crowd that he cannot hurt her as she has held true to her belief, whereas he has deserted both her and it. She, however, is a martyr for her cause, her last

³ Poems during this time were known to be published in various periodicals and newspapers across the country, and because of that, this may not be the original occurrence, but one of many.

⁴ There is no existing record of this book. It would have had to go through a publisher, but I have not been able to find any results during my research this far.

words promoting what she is willing to die for : “Now marksmen, your target is ready;/ Aim here, please. Vive la Commune!” (51-2). This poem advances the belief that these pétroleuses are indeed willing sacrifices and not victims of the civil war. And because Joyce’s interpretation of Mathilde’s execution differs from Wilber’s description of it, the reader sees how Joyce attempted to advance the ideals of the revolution for which she dies. He, at the same time, condemns her lover who ruins the country through his defection. Joyce admires both the pétroleuse and her political cause. He also supports one American literary and popular sentiment of the pétroleuse and for the Commune: a value for patriotism and courage in fighting for freedom from subjugation.

Another poem very similar to Joyce’s is Edward King’s “A Woman’s Execution, Paris, May ‘71” initially appearing in the September 1871 edition of *Scribner’s Monthly*, a popular periodical which generally upheld a religious and upright moral tone (Chielens 364). In King’s poem, Marie, a “youthful and brazen” pétroleuse comparable to Joyce’s appears to be speaking: “Sweet-breathed and young—/ The people’s daughter:/ No nerves unstrung—/ Going to slaughter!” (1-4). King depicts her as a fiery political figure proud of her and her fellow pétroleuses’ actions against the suppressive government: ““Good morning, friends!/ You’ll love us better--/ Make us amends: We’ve burst your fetter!” (4-8). Here, the exclamation points reveal Marie’s fervor for the revolution (13). Moreover, she is pleased to have broken the chains subjecting her and those of the urban class. Indeed, she deems herself “Liberty’s darling!” (12). Her enthusiasm for her cause and her nonchalant manner towards death therefore depict her as a martyr, one very similar to Joyce’s speaker. King, too, supports the revolutionary actions of the pétroleuse as his speaker upholds the ideals of freedom and liberty. Furthermore, like Joyce, King juxtaposes Marie with her unfaithful lover, Jean: ““He at the front?/ That is my lover:/

Stood all the brunt; Now the fight's over!'" (21-4). In betraying her, Jean becomes a traitor to the people's cause. His defection and the pétroleuse's scorn of it demonstrate that King viewed the revolution as a positive force against the suppressive government. Not only is Jean a traitor, but he appears weak in this description. By mocking him and uttering the words "long live the Commune" just before her execution, King depicts Marie as more courageous than her ex-lover: she dies for the Commune's ideals whereas he cannot. And by painting her in such a favorable light, one similar to Joyce's depiction of Brunot, the reader sympathizes both with her and the revolution. At the same time, the reader condemns her ex-lover and those against the revolution who did not support the cause of the pétroleuses.

American poet Sarah M.B. Piatt also attempted to tackle the question of the pétroleuse through her poem "The Palace-Burner (A Picture in a Newspaper)," which initially appeared in the congressionalist New York newspaper *The Independent* in 1872⁵. The central question of this poem is how the mother-speaker would answer her child's question as to whether or not she would "burn palaces" (33). The underlying question then is if the mother would have been a pétroleuse and joined the women revolutionaries of the Commune. Initially, the mother appears to have a strong opinion regarding the matter: "women brave as she/ Leave much for cowards such as I to guess" (3-4). Here, the speaker appears to purport that the pétroleuse is a brave woman, able to stand up for her cause, whereas she herself is a coward. The mother implies that she would have been unable to support this revolution. The word "coward," and the speaker's self-identification with it, would then denote that she would have wanted to support the cause, but lacked the courage to do so. And as a coward, the mother would have upheld the laws and not joined the revolutionaries. Indeed, she tells her son to do the same: "Have I not taught you to

⁵ I originally viewed the poem in Paula Bennett's book *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt* (2001). I take my periodical and newspaper identifications from Edward Chielens' book *American Literary Magazines* (1986).

respect the laws?/ You would have burned the palace[?]" (15-6). Here, the mother acknowledges that the pétroleuses acted against the French government. However, because the pétroleuse is brave, the speaker admires her willingness to rise up against those suppressing the common people. The fact that the mother is a coward, though, would suggest that regardless of her political beliefs, she, too, would have upheld these laws, unlike the pétroleuse. The pétroleuse, in her bravery, appears part of a positive insurrection.

Piatt further promotes the idea that the revolution was a positive force for the French people through the martyr-like description of the pétroleuse. Piatt gives the pétroleuse a quiet authority. She, like the pétroleuses in Joyce's and King's poems, also is a martyr dying for her cause: "And could she wear/ Such utter life upon a dying face,/ Such unappealing, beautiful despair,/ Such garments—soon to be a shroud—with grace?" (25-8). Piatt reveals a stoic woman, one who holds herself strong, even until death. The pétroleuse is brave and shrewd, possessing a "charm so calm that it could breathe/ In damp, low places till some frightened hour;/ Then start, like a fair, subtle snake, and wreath a stinging poison with a shadowy power" (29-30). Here, the pétroleuse is frightening and mesmerizing. By using the snake simile, Piatt gives the pétroleuse a great deal of power. She has influence and the ability to lead a revolution. However, the snake image also appears negative, revealing that her charm is also deathly. Indeed, her charm and bravery eventually lead her to the execution line for the devastation she and her fellow pétroleuses supposedly enacted. She does, though, remain strong and devoted to her cause with "utter life upon a dying face," even until right before her execution. Piatt depicts the pétroleuse as a brave woman able to contribute to a revolution in support of the principals of the urban class. This woman appears as a martyr, dying with grace for the same cause she upheld.

However, the intricate syntax of the last stanza calls into question both the mother's initial assertion that she would not have burned palaces and the positive perception of the Commune. After reflecting on the conversation with her child, the mother questions herself: "Would *I* burn palaces?" (33). In response to her dilemma, the mother states that "The child has seen/ in this fierce creature of the Commune here,/ So bright with bitterness and so serene/ A being finer than my soul, I fear" (33-6). However, who is the mother talking about? Is the speaker "the fierce creature of the Commune?" If so, "this fierce creature" refers to the mother, who views herself as the pétroleuse in the picture. Yet, she believes that the child does not see her as such, and thereby regards her as better than the pétroleuse. Thus, this interpretation insinuates that the speaker recognizes her own revolutionary tendencies, but the child does not and subsequently believes her better than the pétroleuse with whom she identifies. The speaker could also be asserting that the child saw in her the revolutionary tendencies, ones which would render the image the child sees as "A being finer than [the speaker's] soul." In other words, the child sees the pétroleuse as positive and identifies his mother with that image. The mother also views the pétroleuse in a positive light, as brave, but knows that she, as a coward, is not in fact a pétroleuse. Her child, then, would have assumed that the speaker's soul "is finer" than the cowardly one she possess. However, the speaker could also fear the fierce creature that "the child has seen...[is] a being finer than [her] soul," meaning that the speaker is worried that her son has realized that she is cowardly and would not be willing to fight for her beliefs like the pétroleuse. Yet another interpretation could be that the speaker fears "this fierce creature," signifying that she does not support the actions of the pétroleuse and would not consequently have supported burning palaces. I believe that Piatt purposefully left the interpretation of this last stanza ambiguous due to the fact that neither the speaker nor the American population knew how to

react to the idea of women burning palaces. Whatever the interpretation may be, the poem still ends in fear, revealing how Americans feared the pétroleuse's revolutionary actions.

A different central figure than the pétroleuse, the child subject of "The Hero of the Commune: An Incident at the Paris Siege," published anonymously in April 1872 in *Scribner's*, changes how the reader perceives the Commune. This poem, though similar in style to Joyce's and King's poems, blames the revolutionary tendencies the other two poems support. In analyzing this poem, then, we can see just how crucial the figure of the pétroleuse was in emblemizing the anxiety Americans felt about the French class struggles. The adult pétroleuse, though young, still has the ability to make her own decision to be a martyr, whereas the child in this poem bases his decision to do so on his father's actions: "'We're here to be shot;/ And there by the pillar's the very spot,/ Fighting for France, my father fell./ --Ah, well!/ That's just the way I would choose to fall,/ With my back to the wall!'" (10-5). The reader is aghast that a young "garçon...Scarcely as much as ten years old" would choose to die for a cause he could, arguably, barely comprehend. The soldier, too, appears disgusted that he must execute the boy: "but who/ Wants wolfish work like this to do?/ Bah! 'This but butcher's business'" (18-20). And by the end of the poem, he cannot bring himself to kill the child: "*Parbleu!*—Come out of the line, I say!/ Come out!" (47-8). The child, therefore, does not appear to be a martyr like the pétroleuse, but instead an innocent victim caught up in the ordeal of the Commune. Ironically, the man who, "when the church-clock yonder tolls out *Three*" will shoot all of the prisoners lined up against the wall, appears the "Hero of the Commune" the title references for saving the child's life (25). A different soldier may not have spared the boy's life. In fact, the "*gendarmes* put [him] there, in the row," suggesting that the soldier is an anomaly; the police would have let him be executed (6). This poem does not promote the revolution, nor blame the aristocratic government for

causing the Commune. Instead, it endorses ending the bloodshed to ensure no more children like this young boy are almost executed. Though the poem is stylistically similar to Joyce's and King's poems, the change in subject brings about a change in meaning. The symbol of the pétroleuse is able to depict American reactions to the class struggles in France. The child, on the other hand, only evokes pity and astonishment. Without the figure of the pétroleuse as the central speaker, we as readers do not see the American apprehension of or appreciation towards the uprising of the urban class

American fascination with the pétroleuse and with the theme of the working class uprising arose because what occurred in France "became a convenient reflection of what some people feared *might* happen in America (instead of what actually occurred in Paris)" (Katz 123). Could the labor force in the United States mirror the actions of France's? An increased presence of the working class in America became difficult to ignore (Katz 166). Indeed, "the events of the Commune led some American observers to wonder about the future of labor relations in [the United States]" (Katz 166). In worrying about how to react to the United States' labor class tensions, Americans looked to France's current class dilemma. The pétroleuse, in symbolizing the urban class' struggle, then became a central figure in America. In analyzing the pétroleuse, Americans could understand possible motivations as to why the American labor class would revolt in the future. Some of these analyses came through the literary sphere, and reveal American anxiety over how to react to their own labor class tensions and the society instigating them. Would the American government be at fault for its own labor class uprising? Did the American society of the 1870s perpetuate extreme class divisions which could cause an insurrection? Regardless of the answers to these questions, understanding the pétroleuse and her reasons for rebellion allows us to better understand both how America perceived labor relations

in France and how those could possibly affect the American “lower-middle” and “working” classes in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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